

The Special Status of Person: a Typological/Diachronic Investigation

The person feature has special properties that set it apart from number and gender: verbs are favored over adjectives for person agreement (*The Agreement Universal*, Stassen 1997), and person agreement is restricted to local syntactic configurations (Baker 2008). This talk discusses several predictions of the hypothesis that the uneven distribution of the person feature across agreement targets can be traced to its origin from morphologically incorporated pronouns.

The first prediction is that person agreement should be found only where the structural relation between controller and target is a syntactic configuration that is conducive to pronoun incorporation. These include subject-predicate configurations, head-complement configurations, and configurations involving a head and the specifier of its complement. Another precondition for incorporation is string adjacency between the pronoun and a head into which it may be incorporated (Givón 1976, Ariel 1999, p. 209, Simpson and Wu 2002, Fuss 2005, inter alia). This hypothesis allows the Agreement Universal to be implied by another universal that does not involve agreement, namely Stassen's (1997, p. 42) Auxiliary Universal: *If a language allows independent, non-supported, encoding of predicates, this encoding will always comprise event predicates*. This prediction will be refined, however, to allow for occasional differences between the placement of full NPs versus pronouns, which create a mismatch between the syntactic positions of controllers and the positions conducive to pronoun incorporation.

A second prediction is that the person and number features encoded by a target agreement morpheme, if derived from such a mono-morphemic source, will be *bundled* in the sense that any agreement relation involving such a morpheme must comprise both features. If a target has the ability to inflect for person, and enters into an agreement relation that is for number, then the target will track the person feature of the controller. This rules out *person insensitivity under a structural condition* (Coppock and Wechsler 2011), where a given target can agree in both person and number (i.e. it inflects for both features and agrees in both features in normal syntactic contexts) but fails to agree in person in certain syntactic contexts. The only proposed case of this is found in Sakha (Baker, 2008), but this case is controversial (Coppock, Hahm and Wechsler 2012).

A third prediction involves the distinction between argument–predicate and noun–modifier agreement in gender. Target inflections involved in argument–predicate agreement are assumed to derive from pronouns, since they can serve as arguments. Those involved in NP–internal noun–modifier agreement are assumed to derive from classifiers. Since classifiers derive from superordinate common nouns like ‘man’, ‘animal’, ‘vegetable’, etc., and nouns are an open class, the number of classifier categories can be quite large in some languages. But pronouns form a closed class. So argument–predicate gender agreement is expected to involve smaller numbers of animacy/gender-related distinctions, while noun–modifier agreement involves larger numbers of distinctions (Aikhenvald, 2000, p. 392).

By taking a historical perspective on the distribution of agreement features, we hope to shed further light on the synchronic principles governing agreement.

References

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